

Healthy Mealtime Habits: 6-12 Years

As your 6- to 12-year-old spends more of the day away from home and eats more meals and snacks away from your watchful eyes, providing her with the knowledge of how to make good food choices will become more important. At the same time, the meals you do share together will become a sort of "insurance policy" for your child, as these meals will provide the nutritious foods that can offset any empty-calorie fare consumed outside the home.

Family Meals

No doubt you've already discovered what an important role model you are to your child. In no area is this more apparent than nutrition. Today's busy families may not always have opportunities to share a meal together, but you should try to eat meals together.

Getting together for meals provides many benefits. Here are a few:

- It enables you to act as a role model for good eating habits.
- It helps ensure that your child is eating nutritious foods.
- It allows you to find out your child's latest food likes and dislikes.
- It gives you an opportunity to introduce your child to new foods.
- It keeps you in tune with your child's triumphs and troubles.

The meals your child eats at home sets the tone for food they pick for themselves. Continue to encourage good eating habits by:

- Buying a variety of healthy foods, including fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain breads and cereals
- Setting specific times for meals and snacks
- Limiting sugary, high-fat snacks (Not only do they contain little of nutritional value; they leave no room for healthy foods.)
- Avoiding adding excessive salt to foods
- Encouraging your child to drink plenty of water, not just high-calorie fruit juices and empty-calorie sodas
- Avoiding caffeine in the foods and drinks you serve

You can't expect your child to choose water and an apple if you're snacking on colas and cookies.

Meals Away From Home

A child in this age group may be eating meals outside the home as often as (or more often than) she is eating at home. There may be snacks and lunch at school, birthday parties and sleepovers with friends, and scouting or sporting events. Will your child carry those good eating habits you've

instilled out into the world? There are still a few things you can do to help:

- Make sure your child eats a nutritious breakfast.
- Send your child to school with a healthy lunch each day. Or, if food is provided at school, keep an eye on snack and lunch menus to make sure they meet your standards for nutrition. If they don't, make your concerns known to the appropriate staff at the school.
- Offer your child advice on how to choose healthy foods in a restaurant. Encourage her to include a salad or vegetables in her meals when ordering out.
- Continue to offer your child new and interesting foods at home, so that she has a wide variety of healthy choices when she is eating out.
- Allow your child to enjoy the birthday cake, ice cream, chocolate bars, and other treats that are such a sweet and memorable part of childhood. Simply make sure these foods are eaten in moderation, and balance the treats with more healthful fare at mealtimes.
- At fast-food restaurants teach your child the benefits of lower-fat selections. The typical cheeseburger fries, and soda may be enticing, but encourage them to look for salads, grilled chicken sandwiches, and baked potatoes
- If your child simply must have that burger, suggest the simplest one on the menu rather than the double-decker, cheese-and-heavy-sauce-smothered advertised special. Fast-food restaurants offer milk and juice, too, so encourage your child to avoid the sodas and milk shakes. And remember to set a good example yourself.

Another Healthy Habit: Exercise

Physical activity goes hand in hand with a good diet to help ensure a healthy body. Most children love to run and play and should be encouraged to do so each day. Encourage your child to replace television time with more physical activity. Don't count on your child's school day to provide enough activity - most do not. Also, don't count on group sports to give your child sufficient amounts of physical exertion. Practices and games rarely provide enough actual physical activity time per child to count toward a daily exercise routine. Rather, plan activities for the whole family that get you up and moving. Try: dancing together, playing on the backyard swingset or at the local playground, swimming, taking a family run or walk, riding bikes (Don't forget to wear helmets!) in-line skating or ice skating (Don't forget to wear helmets!) , playing tag, running relay races, flying a kite, playing catch.

Set a good example by taking part in an exercise program yourself, whether alone or with your kids. Whatever activity

you do together, remember to make exercise fun so it becomes an important and pleasant part of your child's life.

Breakfast

There is no meal that is more important than the first one of the day. Studies show that kids who skip breakfast or eat unhealthy foods, like doughnuts or pastries, can have a hard time concentrating just a few hours later. To head off this problem, find foods your child likes to eat and serve them in the morning, even if they're not "traditional" breakfast fare. These options may beat sugary cereals and cakes nutritionally, and they will help your child do her best all morning long, whether at school or play.

If, like most kids, your child loves cereals, buy the lower-sugar or unsweetened varieties and sweeten them up with slices of fruit or raisins. At some point your child may ask you to buy some high-sugar, low-nutrition cereal. If you give in, "dilute" the sugary cereal with an equal amount of a nutritious whole-grain cereal.

What's for lunch, Mom?"

If you pack lunches for your child each day, you already know it can be a challenge to send foods that are healthy and appealing. One idea to overcome this challenge is to involve your youngster in the preparation. Ask your child to help pack her lunch box, encouraging her to pack healthy foods she enjoys as well as the occasional treat. This activity of selecting her own lunch may make your child less likely to trade her food for less nutritious items her friends may have or to throw it away.

Teach your child that a bag lunch needs to be well-rounded by packing something from each of the food groups: protein, grains, fruits, vegetables, and dairy. Here are some healthful ideas:

- For protein, try water-packed tuna, sliced ham or turkey, bean chili, baked beans, peanut butter, or hard-boiled eggs.
- For grains, try whole-wheat breads and crackers, low-fat bran muffins, or pretzels.
- For fruits and vegetables, try sliced fresh fruit, carrot and celery sticks, or a thermos of cooked vegetables.
- For dairy, try a thermos of low-fat milk, a container of low-fat yogurt, low-fat cheese, or a scoop of low-fat cottage cheese.

Snacks

Kids in this age group are often "super-snackers." If this is the case with your school-age child, you'll want to emphasize healthy food choices at snack time. The best idea, especially for today's hectic households, is to keep good-tasting, good-for-you foods close and accessible. Ask your child what she'd like to have on hand. Maximize the nutritional value of snack time by combining a few of the ideas below:

microwave popcorn (low-salt, low-fat variety) fresh fruit, celery and carrot sticks with low-fat dip or dressing, raisins and other dried fruits, low-fat or nonfat milk and yogurt, low-sugar cereals, unsweetened applesauce, frozen fruit juice on a stick, frozen bananas graham crackers, fresh fruit juice, pretzels, "trail mix" - dried fruit, nuts, low-sugar cereal, mini-pretzels

Dinner

You can keep dinner interesting by allowing your child to participate in the planning and purchasing of meals. Encourage your child to design menus, choosing at least one favorite food for each meal, and then take her to the supermarket to buy food for the week. As you shop, explain the choices you make. Teach your child that many of the most attractively packaged and promoted foods are often empty-calorie and highly processed fare. You and your child can read food labels together and learn how to compare the nutritional content of different foods and different brands. Once again, you are giving your child the tools to make healthy food choices for the rest of her life.

Your child can start to help out in the kitchen, too: teach her how to wash and trim vegetables and measure and pour ingredients. Instruct your child on food safety and the safe use of the microwave and stove. By age 10, many kids are comfortable cooking and can be trusted with small heating or baking chores, as long as an adult is close by. Simply being involved in the preparation can make a meal tastier to a child.

Don't cater to a finicky eater by cooking special meals just for her. Make sure your child doesn't go hungry even if she snubs the main dish by including something in the meal that you know she likes. A slice of bread, piece of fruit, or a helping of potatoes will tide her over to the next meal or snack. Let her know that it is not acceptable if she complains about individual dishes she dislikes. Make it clear that she may not ruin the meal for the rest of the family and that she will not be eating anything else until the next scheduled snack or meal.

Healthy Food Choices: 6 to 12 Years

As your child grows, continue to emphasize the main food groups, and strive to find choices from each group that your child enjoys. By the age of 5 or 6, a child can tell you pretty clearly what she likes and what she might be hungry for. Try to accommodate your child's tastes as much as possible, as long as the choices are within reason. Boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 10 require about 1,800 to 2,400 calories each day. This number rises considerably as children head into puberty. Girls begin to require about 200 calories per day more between the ages of 10 and 12. Boys start to need about 500 calories per day more after age 12. These additional calories and nutrients help fuel the incredible growth that occurs during adolescence.

Breads, cereals, rice, and pasta (6-11 servings)

Examples of servings:

1 slice of bread

½ bagel

¾ cup ready-to-eat cereal

½ cup cooked cereal

½ cup cooked pasta or rice

5-6 whole-grain crackers

Other good choices: cornbread, English muffins, reduced-fat muffins, low-salt, low-fat popcorn

Vegetables (3-5 servings)

Examples of servings:

¼ - ½ cup cooked vegetables

½ - 1 cup raw vegetables

Good choices: asparagus, beets, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, corn, green and red peppers, green beans, lettuce and other greens, peas, potatoes, pumpkin, spinach, squash, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, vegetable juices, zucchini

Fruit (2-4 servings)

Examples of servings:

1 piece of fruit

½ cup canned fruit

½ cup juice

Good choices: apples, applesauce, apricots, bananas, cantaloupe, fruit cocktail, 100% fruit juices, grapefruit, kiwifruit, nectarines, oranges, peaches, plums, strawberries, watermelon

Dairy products (3 or 4 servings)

Examples of servings:

¾ - 1 cup low-fat or nonfat milk

1 - 1 ½ ounces low-fat or reduced-fat cheese

1 cup low-fat or nonfat yogurt

Other good choices: low-fat cottage cheese, ice milk, frozen yogurt, pudding

Meat, fish, poultry, and legumes (2 or 3 servings)

Examples of servings:

2 - 3 ounces of cooked lean meat, poultry, fish, or tofu

1 egg, ½ cup cooked dry beans, or 2 tablespoons of peanut butter counts as 1 ounce of lean meat

Other good choices: shellfish, dried peas, lentils, reduced-fat cold cuts

Facts on Fat and Fiber

Hopefully you've already reduced the fat in your child's diet. Although an adequate amount of dietary fat is crucial to development in very young children, dietary fat should begin to be reduced after age 2 or 3 to contribute only about 30% of the total calories for the day. Here are some ways to cut back:

- Switch from whole milk to fat-free or nonfat (skim) milk or low-fat or light (1%) milk.
- Serve more fish and poultry, and cut back on red meat.

- Remove the skin from poultry, and trim fat from meats.
- Reduce butter and margarine use.
- Use low-fat cooking methods, such as baking, broiling, grilling, poaching, and steaming.
- Serve fiber-rich foods, including whole-grain breads, cereals, dried peas and beans, fruits, and vegetables.

Fiber is an important nutritional component for children this age. Dietary fiber may play a role in reducing the chances of developing heart disease and cancer later in life. If you provide the suggested servings of fruits and vegetables each day and serve whole-grain breads and cereals, you'll be well on the way toward ensuring your child gets enough dietary fiber.

The recommendation is to add 5 to your child's age to figure out how many grams of fiber she should be consuming each day. You can boost fiber intake by serving fresh salad with your meals, adding oat or wheat bran to any baked goods you make, and offering legumes such as chickpeas, lentils, and kidney beans at least once a week. Fiber intake should be increased gradually, though, since excessive fiber can cause painful bloating and gas. Don't forget to have your child drink plenty of water each day as well, since this can help reduce the chances of fiber-related intestinal discomfort. Be aware that excessive fiber can interfere with the body's absorption of crucial vitamins and minerals.

Calcium Counts

While calcium becomes even more important as puberty begins, it is important that school-age children get adequate amounts of dietary calcium to help ensure strong, healthy bones. Children ages 4 to 8 require 800 milligrams of calcium daily, while children ages 9 to 18 require 1,300 milligrams daily. You can meet these requirements by offering your children calcium-rich foods such as: fat-free or nonfat (skim) milk or low-fat or light (1%) milk, low-fat or nonfat yogurt, low-fat or reduced-fat cheese, calcium-fortified fruit juices, ice cream and frozen yogurt (occasionally)

Taming the Sweet Tooth

Almost everyone has a sweet tooth. You can't do much to take the sweet tooth out of the kid, but you can help control your child's access to sweets by keeping these foods out of your pantry. Children who feast on sugary foods wind up with little appetite for better food choices, so let sweets be a "once-in-a-while" snack. This way you'll help your child develop a taste for other foods. Brush up on ways to sweeten the taste of foods without adding processed sugar. Fruit juices, unsweetened applesauce, and prune purees can be used in place of fats and sugars in many recipes.

Caffeine

Ditch the caffeine as well. Caffeine doesn't belong in a child's diet. Since caffeine is a stimulant, it can interfere with your child's concentration and ability to sleep well. Avoid soft drinks and iced tea, since these beverages can contain large quantities of caffeine.

Nutritional Supplements

Many healthy children who eat a variety of good foods do not need supplements. Even the pickiest eater, given good food choices, will probably get what is needed over the course of a few days or a week. Check with your pediatrician if you're not sure that your child's diet provides the necessary nutrients.

The Pediatrician however may recommend a fluoride supplement for your child if you are using a nonfluoridated water supply.

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From the AAP & AMA**

